The First Crossing of the Rub’ Al Khali


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Moryson then proceeds to discuss the length of the mile in the principal countries of Europe. The 'Itinerary' was not published until 1617, but the travels recorded therein belong to the years 1591–1603.

Mr. Heawood, Librarian R.G.S., contributes a note on the English mile in Plot's 'Natural History of Oxfordshire' (1st edn. 1677), and in Saxton's map of England. Plot says:

"As for the scale of miles, there being three sets in Oxfordshire, the greater, the less, and the middle miles, as almost everywhere else; it is contrived according to the middle set of them; for these I conceive may be most properly called the true Oxfordshire miles, which upon actual Dimensuration at several places I found to contain for the most part 9 furlongs and a quarter, of which about 60 answer a degree. . . . I intend not that there are 60 of these miles in a Degree, according to the common account; for reckoning 5280 Feet (or 8 Furlongs) to a mile as usually in England, no less than 69 will correspond to a Degree; upon which account it is and no other, that of the middle Oxfordshire miles, each containing 9 Furlongs and a Quarter, about 60 will do it."

On the other hand Saxton's large map of England (1583) give scales of miliaria "magna," "mediocria," and "parva," with the statement that "integra huius scalae longitudo [i.e. length] uni latitudinis gradui respondent." These give respectively 50, 55, and 60 miles to the degree of latitude (69'1 modern miles in the latitude of England), so that it is the smallest mile, the parva, which corresponds to the nautical mile.

THE FIRST CROSSING OF THE RUB' AL KHALI

To Mr. Bertram Thomas, the first man of any race, so far as we know, to cross the Empty Quarter, the President and Council in the name of the Society have cabled their congratulations, and in response to a second telegram Mr. Thomas has undertaken to describe his journey at the Evening Meeting of May 18. His success crowns a long and careful preparation, of which the last step was recorded in the paper read to the Society in the absence of the author by Sir Arnold Wilson on June 2 and published as the first paper of the current volume. Entering at the Dhufar port of Salala on 8 January 1930, Mr. Thomas had made his way north-north-west to the water-hole and abandoned fort of Shisur, on the southern limit of the sand, hoping to start northwards thence for a ten-days' march into their centre. But he could not carry his escort of Al Kathir tribesmen with him, and the most that he could then accomplish was the journey north-east from Shisur along the edge of the sands to Al 'Ain, whence he returned by a somewhat different route to Salala. It was a great journey, but left the main problem unsolved.

"There is," said Mr. Thomas in this paper, "a considerable element of luck in the penetration of Arabia," the local tribal situation at the moment being the decisive but incalculable factor, and it is therefore very unsatisfactory to say anything of plans in advance. Hence it was known only to a few that about last
Christmas Mr. Thomas made a fresh start. Those few have been anxiously
awaiting the telegram which announced a complete success. In the Times of
February 23 there was a brief statement that Mr. Thomas had crossed the Rub' 
al Khali from Dhufar to Dohah on the western edge of the peninsula El Qatar,
and in the course of that day the Society received the following telegram, dated
Bahrein, February 22, 4.30 p.m.:

Successfully crossed Rub' al Khali Indian Ocean to Persian Gulf by camel
this winter three relays Rashed and Murra Badwin route Dhufar Shisur
westwards ending [? edging] southern borders sand to longitude fifty-one
thence north to Dohah bringing traverse records geological and natural
history specimens England April. Bertram Thomas.

This telegram was read to the Evening Meeting, who were asked to associate
themselves with the message of congratulation sent that afternoon by the
President and Council.

The Times of February 26 printed a dispatch dated Bahrein, February 24,
which we take leave to summarize briefly. The camel journey of 900 miles took
fifty-eight days, of which forty-five were marching, an average of eight hours
a day in the saddle. The start was from Dhufar, presumably from the port of
Salala, with an escort of thirty men and forty camels, which was progressively
reduced. On reaching Shisur Mr. Thomas made a waterless march of 100 miles
along the southern edge of the sands, and in latitude $19^\circ$ longitude $52^\circ 30'$
crossed old, deep-cut caravan tracks known as the Road to Ubar. In latitude
$19^\circ$ longitude $50^\circ 45'$ he turned northwards across the centre of the sands, the
country west of the line being reported rising in altitude and waterless; east of
it the sands falling and water extremely plentiful, but brackish in parts and
undrinkable by man and sometimes even by camels; the land inhabited by
scattered sections of Al Kathir and Al Murra tribes. The country fell steadily
northward until in latitude $23^\circ 40'$, approaching the coast of the Persian Gulf,
there was a lake of salt water below sea-level.

The Society will look forward with keen interest to hearing the details of this
remarkable journey whereby one of the few remaining great geographical
enterprises has been accomplished.